

# RelBib

Bibliography of the Study of Religion

<https://relbib.de>

Dear reader,

the article „*An Anthropological Perspective on Jayeel S. Cornelio’s ‘Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines’: Generalizability, Geographic Differences, and Ideal-Typical Protestants*“ by Peter J. Bräunlein, was originally published in *Journal of World Christianity*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2018, pages 160-164, Copyright © 2019 by the New York Theological Seminary.

This article is used by permission of The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Thank you for supporting Green Open Access.

Your RelBib team

# **An Anthropological Perspective on Jayeel S. Cornelio's *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines*: Generalizability, Geographic Differences, and Ideal-Typical Protestants**

PETER J. BRÄUNLEIN  
UNIVERSITÄT LEIPZIG

**ABSTRACT:** This response engages with Jayeel S. Cornelio's *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines* from an anthropological perspective, asking what conclusions can be drawn from this study for a broader perspective on Philippine Catholicism. The book focuses on young students as "creative Catholics" in contemporary Manila, but the sociological position taken by Cornelio may obscure larger differences between young Catholics across the archipelago. His well-educated interlocutors on college campuses appear as highly reflexive quasi-theologians. How do the values they express relate to the larger state of Philippine society? How are the attitudes of Manila-based Catholic youth related to those of youth in the rest of the country? "Creative Catholics" seem to adopt a rather "Protestant" attitude, regarding their "self" as the moral authority and emphasizing moral living and individual emotional experiences of God.

**KEYWORDS:** Philippines, Catholicism, youth, anthropology, Protestantism

## **1. Generalizability: Between Sociology and Anthropology**

The generational approach in the study of religion is fruitful. I learned lots about the religious orientation of university students in Manila who were young when Jayeel S. Cornelio interviewed them. In many regards his research

*The Journal of World Christianity*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2018  
Copyright © 2019 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

reminds me of Alexander Blechschmidt's research on organized atheists and freethinkers in Manila, which is also campus research, at least to a certain extent.<sup>1</sup> Blechschmidt studied individuals from small minorities with strong commitments. Many of his interviewees were also very young. In both cases these young individuals were differently religious or areligious compared with their peers. Studies on marginal people tell us something about the society, of course. But what is this "something"? What conclusions can we draw with regards to Philippine Catholicism?

This leads to issues of generalizability. In *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines* Cornelio explains that "the assertions cannot be assumed to represent all Catholic students, let alone the Filipino youth. As qualitative research, what can be achieved is analytic generalisation, or generalisation to theory which in this case concerns contemporary religious identity construction."<sup>2</sup> I agree with that statement. He shows humbleness by asserting that "the main goal of this book is to offer an understanding of my informants' 'local and specific constructed realities' as Catholics" (38).

This is in accordance with what I read about the researcher's interlocutors. I read a book on *being young, being a student, and being creatively Catholic in contemporary Manila*—a very good book, learned, knowledgeable, and highly recommendable. But I struggle with the programmatic title *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines*.

In the conclusion (chapter 9), the author turns away from the "local and specific constructed realities" of the Catholics interviewed and explains that the book has been concerned with the following questions: *What does being Catholic mean to young people in the Philippines?* and *What social conditions account for the emergence of their religious identity?* (168–69). What conclusions can we draw from the local and specific constructed realities of young Catholics from various university campuses in Manila?

Sociology wants to offer sustainable knowledge that is relevant for society and holds up in political practice. Sociology fosters the self-image of being able to supply exactly that knowledge. The anthropological point of view is different.

When I read this book, I felt ambivalences in methodology between sociology and anthropology. On the one hand, it is sociology that promises sustainable knowledge depicted in percentage numbers and statistics. Hard facts and general statements guarantee factual truth. On the other hand, it is the encounters in the field, the informants, that cast doubt on that kind of knowledge, and the author starts to flirt with the idea of partial truth, which basically comes from anthropology. The interplay between anthropologist and informant is always "negotiated interaction," as Cornelio experienced during fieldwork. I would like to know more about these negotiations in the processes of the researcher's fieldwork.

Cornelio identifies trends out of the interviews, but, nevertheless, I feel a bit lost as a reader who wants to know more about Catholicism in Philippine society. Cornelio decided to focus on individuals and wrote a book "on what religion means to an individual." This is absolutely fine, but it somehow contradicts ambitions to generalize. This brings me to my next point, which is about lived religion versus religious conversations.

The individuals are portrayed mostly as highly reflexive quasi-theologians. This is, of course, an effect of the topic list from which guiding questions were elaborated.

The interlocutors refer to values, an exemplary way of life, and thinking of what Jesus would do in this and that case. They consider themselves to be true Filipino Catholics. That could lead to an impression that Philippine Catholicism consists of a set of values centering on compassion, altruism, and spiritual experience. When it comes to corruption, violence, prostitution, criminality, and the present Catholic president, who was elected by a Catholic majority, a very different picture of this country becomes visible.

How can we as social scientists deal with this fact? Is there a split between private religiosity and social reality? If this is true, then we have to reflect upon it. Can we segregate religion from politics? Can we confine religion to the inside of the private home, whereas outside different rules and values prevail? When scholars draw such conclusions, they should reflect exactly on that paradox.

Many of the interviewees wanted to make a career as businessmen. This raises serious questions on values: Will they become Catholic businessmen, guided by Jesus Christ as a role model, which probably will not pay off, or will they simply become tough businessmen, which is hardly associated with compassion and altruism?

What about the family as a core value? Catholicism is of course a high value in Philippine society, but the family is rated much higher. Family bonds are very strong. Family and family networks demand commitment and loyalty, and they affect interpersonal relationships. Living a life against the expectations of family is really hard. The family orientation has consequences for common concepts of justice or injustice and for moral attitudes in general. Fernando Zialcita once did a study on concepts of justice and injustice, about sin and moral orientation among flagellants in the province of Bulacan. Interestingly, he found out that there is no general concept of sin in Philippine society: "In my conversations with the flagellants, they stated that murder and forcing a woman are sins, but lying, stealing, premarital and extramarital sex are not necessarily so. It all depends on the situation. Therefore, unless they have killed or raped, sin and repentance would not be a central reality in their lives."<sup>3</sup>

I think that we learn more about moral attitudes when we study them in action. Therefore, I missed the conflicts in the lifeworld of the researcher's

interlocutors. Normal life events oftentimes turn into questions of right or wrong decisions. Narratives about such moral discrepancies would have been revealing, just like stories about family conflicts. But to follow people in their everyday world would probably be another study and is, of course, time-consuming.

## 2. A Gap Between Manila and the Rest

To study the younger generation and their religious affiliations and aspirations is near at hand in a country that is demographically very young. But how can we deal with the gap between Manila and the rest? Apart from Manila, Cebu, and Davao, the island archipelago of the Philippines is very rural. Would the author think that the results of his study can be generalized? Are the findings applicable to youth outside the metropolitan area? He mentions that problem, by concluding that “those who come from rural provinces tend to be more traditional in fulfilling sacramental obligations like going to Mass and praying the rosary” (5). Implicitly Cornelio tells us that rural Catholics are less reflexive and more ritual-oriented than the nonprovincial Catholics. We can discuss whether this is a value judgment or shows some Protestant underpinnings in this book, but I think that the topic should deserve more attention.

## 3. Creative Catholics as Ideal-Typical Protestants?

Creative Catholics seem to be the better Protestants. This is the impression I got from their portraits in this book. Creative Catholics regard their “self” as the moral authority; they emphasize moral living and individual emotional experiences of God. Meanwhile, religious practices concerning the sacraments are secondary for creative Catholics.

The interviewee Imman (see 63–67), for example, sees himself as a “practical” Catholic. This means that he emphasizes “right living more than right believing.” This is Lutheran in principle. According to this principle, the true Christian person has to live an exemplary life.

Cornelio concludes that Imman is an intriguing creative Catholic because he participates in the rituals of the Catholic Church but at the same time is considerably ambivalent about institutional beliefs and traditions. He is more interested in making his faith relevant, which also informs his critical attitude toward other Catholics who are “not nice.” Another interviewee, Katherine, shows similar basic attitudes (see 67–69). She doubts many teachings and practices of the Catholic Church and questions the need for mediation by saints, and her religious identity is fixated on the self and its relationship with God.



Cornelio rightly concludes that these young Catholics are reinterpreting their religion: "It is their self that becomes the final arbiter of what is right and what is wrong" (70). Can this process of subjectivization be described as a form of "Protestantization," or is this simply a side effect of a growing (and probably global) expression of an individualized Christian spirituality that ignores the institutions and authorities of established churches? Or is it the analytical lens, colored by the sociological literature written mainly by Protestant scholars, that leads to the impression that young Catholics appear to be ideal-typical Protestants?

Peter J. Bräunlein is a professor of the study of religion at the Universität Leipzig. His research focuses on method and theory in the study of religion, religion and media, material, religion, and Christianity in Europe and Southeast Asia. He has conducted extensive field research in the Philippines and published widely on the history and present of Philippine Catholicism and religion in Southeast Asia.

#### NOTES

1. Alexander Blechschmidt is doing research on the project "Organized Atheism, Humanism, and Freethought in the Philippines: Social Practices, Lived Experiences, and Political Dimensions of Being Nonreligious in a Religious Nation." He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Universität Zürich: [http://www.nonreligion.net/?page\\_id=40](http://www.nonreligion.net/?page_id=40), archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/6zekINDmr>, accessed May 24, 2018.

2. Jayeel Serrano Cornelio, *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines: Young People Reinterpreting Religion* (London: Routledge, 2016), 53; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

3. Fernando N. Zialcita, "Popular Interpretations of the Passion of Christ," *Philippine Sociological Review* 34 (1986): 62.